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SUBJECT: POLLSTERS SAY HOLY WEEK POLLS MAY PREDICT NEXT
PRESIDENT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador met on 2/21 with four leading Mexican pollsters who, in a lively discussion found a few things to agree on -- including the fact that Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) continues to lead the race. They also agreed that if he holds his lead through Holy Week (April 10-14), it's a good indicator the race will be his. The pollsters uniformly expressed confidence in exit polling and quick counts on election day, saying they will be accurate indicators of the victor. But they disagreed on nearly everything else.
End Summary

¶2. (SBU) The pollsters included PRD pollster Ana Cristina Covarrubias, National Action Party (PAN) pollster Rafael Jimenez, Televisa pollster Roy Campos and TV Azteca pollster Francisco Abundis, who with some argument agreed that AMLO leads the polls, PAN candidate Felipe Calderon is second, and PRI candidate Madrazo is third (although several argued that the latter two are nearing a virtual tie.) AMLO's poll numbers couldn't go up much more, they agreed, but certainly had room to fall. If he held his current lead (at least five points across the various polls) through Semana Santa -- the race was virtually his, they concurred.

¶3. (SBU) But they didn't all think that was a likely contingency. In a campaign already studded with a number of scandals, Roy Campos suggested that there could yet be revelations that could affect any of the candidates. Rafael Jimenez stressed that, if the PRI imploded, the race could become a more traditional two-way contest, and PRI voters might look closely at the PAN. He also suggested that candidate Calderon, who had been a little lackluster in his campaigning recently, might regain the dynamism he had shown in December. Abundis cautioned that many voters were now choosing by candidate rather than by party, and decisions on congressional lists (which will be finalized in March and April) could impact the presidential race as well. Jimenez agreed, noting that the PRI in Morelos had divided sharply over candidate selection, and this would undeniably affect the presidential race.

¶4. (SBU) Asked whether we should expect the numbers to come closer together or spread farther apart, Campos cautioned against modelling this presidential race against any previous elections. There are a number of firsts in this race that make it unique in Mexican experience, he added. There are three candidates who, for the first time, each have a chance of winning. It is the first time a non-PRI president defines his role in the process -- and that may affect the outcomes. It is the first election after a dramatic -- but perhaps unsatisfying -- transition in power. These and other factors have an impact on the way voters think. Jimenez agreed, but suggested that last July's Mexico State election reflected the campaign tactics each campaign was using -- the PRI relied on its reliable vote, the PRD spent little money on advertising, the PAN candidate started strong then fell

dramatically. The decisive factors there, Jimenez said, were the PRI's reliable vote combined with low voter turnout overall delivered a PRI victory. In Veracruz, Jimenez continued, there were three strong candidates until the very end -- and different polls favored different candidates. The PRI finally won, but by a small (and controversial) margin.

15. (SBU) The pollsters also debated the role and size of the independent vote. While some estimated as much as 40 percent of the electorate was independent, others suggested it was as low as 20 percent. These voters, Covarrubias said, largely belonged to AMLO. Campos agreed, but noted a percentage were more likely to switch votes and were clearly the PAN target as well. They came around again to the idea that by mid-April the voters will have settled to a larger degree on their candidates, and the polls will better reflect what might happen on July 2.

16. (SBU) All four pollsters expressed absolute confidence in exit polling and quick count procedures that will be used on July 2. They said that in Mexico the pollsters shared information across party lines and company lines in order to validate one another's findings. This had worked effectively in 2000, Abundis said, when it was already clear by early afternoon that Fox was the winner. Exit polls and quick counts in 2000 were entirely consistent, and the pollsters expected the same in 2006. There is no uncertainty with exit polling, Campos said, because people know how they voted.

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